ABOUT RAY JOHNSON
Ray Johnson was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1927, and emerged as an influential figure in early Pop Art and the development of correspondence art as a form in New York. While in high school, Johnson took courses at the Detroit Art Institute and spent one summer in a drawing program at Otis Art Institute in Sewanee, Michigan. From 1945 to 1948, he spent three years at Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, studying under Josef Albers and gaining exposure to the work of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Walter De Kooning, and other important figures. As luck would have it, these were seminal years for the progressive art college as well. In the 1950s, Johnson was involved in the New York avant-garde, experimenting with early Pop, Happenings, and Performance, and he also produced small collage and incorporated references to popular culture, which he termed "motivics." His experiments with seeing off the wall eventually led to the Initial Annual in 1959, the first in New York. Correspondence School. Johnson had his first one-man show in New York at the Lilard Gallery, in 1965. In Orson Welles's review of the exhibition in the New York Times, he dubbed him, "New York's most famous unknown artist." In the early 1960s, Johnson left New York City for Long Island and began living in an increasingly reclusive way, maintaining connections through his mail-art activities. He died, in 1995, in Sag Harbor, Long Island, of an apparent suicide. He is the subject of the 2002 HBO documentary How to Draw a Rainbow, directed by John Waters.

ABOUT RICHARD C.
Richard C. was a friend of Richard Caven and Richard Hammer. He is an artist and curator currently based in London, England, and has worked extensively in the UK. He attended graduate school at East Tennessee State University, in Johnson City, and has served as a curator at the Northwestern Center for Contemporary Art, in Winston-Salem. Richard C. became interested in Ray Johnson's mail art in 1991, after seeing an article in the New York Times about him, and began a correspondence with Johnson. C. later organized an exhibition of Johnson's work in 1997, at the North Carolina Museum of Art, in Raleigh. Correspondence: An Exhibition of the Letters of Ray Johnson. The artist continues to participate actively in the practice of correspondence art, sending work to artists and enthusiasts around the world through the mail.

ABOUT BOB RAY
Bob Ray was born just east of Kansas City, Missouri, in a variety of media, from drawings, paintings, collages, and sculpture to correspondence and performance works. His aesthetic borrows heavily from the Dada and Fluxus movements, with a strong combination of word, gesture, and image. Since 1983, he has been very active in international correspondence art activities and projects in Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan, United States, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Switzerland, and Libya. He has had extensive exchanges with some of the most significant correspondence artists in the world, including Ray Johnson, Richard C., Giorgio Cavallini, and Yorna Cusai.

LOCATION: The Marion and Wayland R. Calhoun Jr. Center for the Arts 181 Calhoun Street, 1st Floor (at the corner of D. Philip & Calhoun Streets) College of Charleston, School of the Arts, Charleston, SC 29401

PARKING: Available In the St. Philip and George Street Garages

GALLERY HOURS: Mon - Sat, 11am - 4pm, or by appointment. OPEN UNTIL 7PM ON THURSDAYS! Free and open to the public.

CONTACT: (843) 953-4422 or halsey@cofc.edu

BLOG: Join the conversation halsey.cofc.edu/BLOG

BOOK A GUIDED TOUR: Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to different time lengths, group sizes, and ages. Contact our Education & Outreach Coordinator, Ashley McKay at mcayg@halsey.cofc.edu or (843) 953-5957.

OUR MISSION: The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

The Halsey Institute’s exhibition and education program is supported in part by the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, the Henry and Sylvia Yaschuk Foundation and our Members.

CONTACT: halsey@cofc.edu
@halseyart
halsey_institute

CORRESPONDENCE ART:
Words, Objects, and Images by Ray Johnson, Richard C., and Bob Ray
January 22 - March 5, 2016

ARTIST RESIDENCY
January 22 to February 11
Bob Ray will work with six area K-12 schools to introduce students to the concept of correspondence art. Ray will also spend time in the gallery working with visitors to create their own mail art. Contact the Halsey Institute at 843.953.4422 for details.

BOB RAY AT ARTIST & CRAFTSMAN SUPPLY, 143 CALHOUN ST
Saturday, January 30, 10AM-12PM & 2PM-5PM
Free and open to the public Ray will be in the shop to lead participants in creating their own correspondence art.

MEMBERS ONLY: DIPUTAT-LED TOUR
Thursday, March 3, 6PM
The Correspondence Art residency and exhibitions are funded in part by the South Carolina Arts Commission, which receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

ARTWORKS

ARTIST RESIDENCY
January 22 to February 11
Bob Ray will work with six area K-12 schools to introduce students to the concept of correspondence art. Ray will also spend time in the gallery working with visitors to create their own mail art. Contact the Halsey Institute at 843.953.4422 for details.

BOB RAY AT ARTIST & CRAFTSMAN SUPPLY, 143 CALHOUN ST
Saturday, January 30, 10AM-12PM & 2PM-5PM
Free and open to the public Ray will be in the shop to lead participants in creating their own correspondence art.

MEMBERS ONLY: DIPUTAT-LED TOUR
Thursday, March 3, 6PM
The Correspondence Art residency and exhibitions are funded in part by the South Carolina Arts Commission, which receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

ARTWORKS
Correspondence Art: A Completely Incomplete History

In 1920, British collector W. Reginald Bray (1870-1940) became the first human to be sent through the mail. Bray thoroughly read the British Postal Code Manual and tried his best to stump the postal office by mailing shoes, fruit, vegetables, a pony, seaweed, and an Irish Terrier, among other objects. Bray further tested the limits of the postal carriers' patience by addressing a postcard to Any Citizen of London, or to That Man Who Lives on an Island. In retrospect, these challenges were among the first-known examples of what we now call “correspondence art.”

From 1916 until his death in 1949, cartoonist Robert Ripley received more mail than any other individual in history—more than a million letters a year during the thirties and forties. People sent him all manner of things, attempting to gain his favor and end up in one of his books or one of his syndicated cartoons. In fact, Ripleymania swept the country at that time, as many people believed (erroneously) that Ripley paid for the privilege of using any story any way he chose. Many authors were so smitten with him, they sold him their obituary addresses, including those addressed in Blank, written by H.G. Wells, and The American Civil War, written by English-to-Japanese, to list a few examples. Once Ripley received a scrap from Japan with just his name written on the back of it, he was bypassing the need for a card or envelope.

While Ripley’s odd mailing was a-pop culture phenomenon within the general population, artists from around the world started to awaken to the possibilities of sending art through the mail. Correspondence art might be defined as an aesthetic or conceptual transaction exchanged through the postal service. It is not an art movement, per se, but it can be considered a practice. In looking for its art-historical antecedents, we need no further than the artist Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp’s use of what he called readymades—found or existing objects that he elevated to the status of art by proclaiming the work to be members of many creative expressions. This “anti-art” approach became popularized as Dada, with Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Man Ray as the ringmasters who, together, disrupted the comfortable assumptions about what art might be and how it may be circulated and interpreted. In the 1960s, members of a group called the Nouveau Réalisme emerged in Europe and began incorporating elements taken from the “real world” into their art—a ticked stub, napkin, bits of newspaper, fragments from advertising, and virtually anything they could scrounge from everyday life and place together into a collage. This abstraction of reality was odd at odds with the prevailing norm of presenting the world realistically. Many of these artists, such as Yves Klein, the artist who created the Nouveau Réalisme, asked their aim was to create a “poetic recycling of urban, industrial and advertising reality.” By the late 1960s, such artists as Ed Ruscha and Dick Higgins were actively proclaiming a new form of this approach in the United States, and these experiments morphed into what came to be called Pop Art. Again, the point was to incorporate advertising and media imagery into artwork as a form of social commentary and aesthetic exploration.

Fluxus, formed and named by George Maciunas, in 1961, was offshoot of Dada. It became an international art movement including the incorporation of real art, performance, literature, dance, and design, continuing in the sensibility of Dada by concentrating more on the creative process than the finished product. Some of the most notable practitioners involved in the Fluxus movement, along with Maciunas, include John Cage, Yoko Ono, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Drew D’Ercole, and Dick Higgins. John Cage became fascinated with the concepts of Zen Buddhism and became interested in exploring chance. Others frequently incorporated found objects and sounds into their various visual and musical compositions. It is interesting to note that this rejection of chance, of the accident and the uncontrolled definitions of art was also happening in Japan in the 1960s, under the name Gutai. The Gutai group binned the lines between art and life, considering the “art of matter as it is,” as stated by Shigara Kazuo, one of its principal proponents, in 1956. The Gutai Movement, as a group, was composed of various art installations, performances, and performances that focused on the relationship of the body to the cosmos.

Around the globe, artists of the 50s and 60’s engaged in a radical reconfiguration of how art was produced, transmitted, and received. The term “interactivity” was often used to describe the multidisciplinary means and means employed by artists during this time. The first “happening” occurred on the campus of Black Mountain College, in the spring of 1962, staged by Joseph Beuys, a poll, involving several other artists in a variety of disciplines. Book art, installations, collaborations, interventions, performances, readings, and college students that were united in different portions to form a new kind of art, and a new way of approaching the world.

All of this forms the backdrop for the exhibition Correspondence Art: Words and Images by Kay Johnson, Richard C., and Bob Ray Johnson (1927-95) is often cited as among the first to activate the usual practice of mail art in the modern art world. They were born in the New York Correspondence [sic] School, a network of mail artists. His was a student of Joseph Albers and later a professor at Black Mountain College from the early 1940’s, and later became a fixture in the New York art world, from the late 1950’s until his self-exile on Long Island in the 1960’s. Pursuing his creeds of friends were Robert Haunchen, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Ad Reinhardt, and Frank O’Hara. Although they did not promote a formal alliance with Fluxus, his work was featured in many of the most important Fluxus exhibitions. The Fluxus artists were among the first to recognize the potential of using the postal service as an economical method of communicating ideas on a global scale.

Beginning in New York in the late 1960s, Ray Johnson began mail exchanges with fellow artists, curators, and writers by sending enigmatic, elliptical collages and texts. By founding the New York Correspondence School, he created an international network of artists who no longer wrote in the same academic, or formal structure—just a conceptual construct—construct. Nearly influenced by the Dada and Fluxus movements, correspondence art began reciprocal communication, an act that existed outside of the commercial and industrial world. Many works were not commodified to be bought, sold, and collected, made correspondence art an exchange’s gift with its own unique rules of engagement. One had to be an artist, a critic, or an artwork to be on the receiving end of this esoteric new form of communication. Very often, one felt he had struck gold, although not in commercial terms. The ephemeral and anti-institutional nature of this genre has rendered it virtually invisible to the general public. There is, however, an International Union of Mail Artists, founded in 1968, numbering now more than forty thousand members today. Although it sounds like an organization, it is actually a loose confederation of artists (much as Fluxus was) who enjoy sharing ideas and working through this unique medium. They do have a website, but they emphasize there are no rules and that this collaboration should be forwarded. In one sense, Richard C. A’s show at the North Carolina Museum of Art was the antidote to Marcia Tucker’s show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, from years before. Tucker included only letters created by the artist while only showed letters sent by the artist.

Bob Ray had a brief correspondence with Ray Johnson during the early 1960s, and had an ongoing exchange with Richard C. since those very same days. This exhibition features a combination of works: some historical works from Ray Johnson to Richard C., drawn from Richard C. and Bob Ray, and some collaborative works, altered by both Richard C. and Bob Ray to me. The range of materials sent to me here at the Holiday Institute of Contemporary Art, is, in effect, a testament to the variety and diversity of the genres of correspondence art. There are poems, found objects, objects, college on hotel stationery, poetry, riddles, cereal box tops, and modified junk mail, among other wonders.

The main goal of this exhibition is to establish a baseline introduction to the genre of correspondence art, while introducing new audiences to this phenomenon through three of its most prolific practitioners. The three artists selected represent a continuum. I hesitate to call this a linear progression, as the works break through any traceable evolution. If nothing else, correspondents artists, in general— and these three, in particular— defy easy categorization in which we might place them, and they would escheat any attempts to do so. It is safe to say that through their visual, yet persistent involvement in this little-known practice they have produced works that offer insight into the creative process itself. There is an aspect of this project that is like the children’s game of Leapfrog. Each artist responds to another’s work in a call-and-response manner, with no beginning or end. There is a powerful current of Dada and Fluxus flowing through this series of works, and the spirit of Ray Johnson hovers above it all.

Mark Sloan
Curator
Dearborn Hall
Holiday Institute of Contemporary Art

The curator would like to thank the following people for their contributions to the exhibition: Bob Ray, Richard C., Mark Sloan, Barbara Hardy, Art and Ehringhaus, Colin Johnson, Ral Matsumoto and the staff of the Holiday Institute of Contemporary Art.